

Essays Introducing a Jewish Perspective on the Gospel of John

An Editorial By

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Abstract: *This article's aim is to highlight the impact that plain sense readings of the Gospel of John have on educated Jewish and Christian lay persons but who typically do not aspire to learn or appropriate current scholarly theories seeking to explain sacred texts in a technical and often inordinately complex fashion. Essay topics include: 1) the anonymous author ("John"), the relationship of his gospel to the Synoptic Gospels, his interpretation of Jewish actions and customs, and his influence on a distinct group of early Christians, the "Johannine" community; 2) John's portrayal of Jesus' self-identification in using the divine name YHWH; 3) John's description and interpretation of various Jewish responses to Jesus, as well as the author's understanding of the reasons for Jews rejecting the message and person of Jesus; and 4) John's portrayal of the early break between Judaism and Christianity, laid entirely at the feet of "the Jews."*

Keywords: Gospel of John, New Testament, Jewish-Christian Dialogue, Johannine Studies, Anti-Jewish Semitism in John

Introduction

IN THREE EARLIER ARTICLES, mention was given to the non-Jewish frame of reference evident in the Synoptic Gospels, the relationship of Saul/Paul to Judaism in general, and the affiliation of Paul with the Pharisees and the Sadducees.¹ It is now incumbent to examine the Gospel of John from a Jewish perspective, seeking a fresh approach to the issue of modern Jewish responses to the Fourth Gospel. The Gospel of John has remained the most popular of the four New Testament gospels since its appearance late in the first century. By any objective standard, the Jesus whom readers encounter in John is a compelling person of wisdom and great compassion. John is anxious to portray

¹ See Charles David Isbell, "Emic or Etic? Interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures," *The Bible and Interpretation: Second Temple Judaism* (2015), bibleinterp.com/PDFs/Isbell.pdf; "Paul and Judaism," *The Bible and Interpretation: New Testament* (2017), bibleinterp.com/PDFs/isbellPaul.pdf; and "Saul the Sadducee? A Rabbinical Thought Experiment," *Socio-Historical Examination of Religion and Ministry* 1, no. 2 (Fall 2019): 85–119, doi.org/10.33929/sherm.2019.vol1.no2.01.



Jesus as a faithful Jew and his followers as the product of a faith that shares (and improves upon!) many of the spiritual values derived from their Jewish heritage. In this effort, the Fourth Gospel offers numerous examples of deeply spiritual and rewarding religious literature: John's brilliant encomium about light and life in the opening chapter; the portrayal of Jesus as a loving friend of Lazarus; the model teacher whose skill and patience with his disciples are matchless; and the itinerant traveler who is open to both outsiders and foreigners. To these qualities, John adds Jesus' tender acceptance of children, his focus on both physical and spiritual wellness, and his concern for the hungry and needy. Ultimately, John's Jesus faces death with bravery and equanimity, willingly offering his own life for the benefit of others. To borrow the word picture of John, Jesus is indeed the "Good Shepherd."

However, while John has indeed been a comfort and inspiration to Christian readers for centuries, the book has often been disturbing for Jewish audiences, as well. Although echoes of anti-Jewish rhetoric are present in the Synoptic Gospels, the rhetoric about Jews in John appears to erupt into open antagonism. Because John refers to "the Jews" more than any other gospel, and because the negative outbursts against these unspecified Jews are so liberally sprinkled throughout the text, the emotional impact on readers can be significant. It appears that virtually all Jewish words and actions are framed in such a way so as to indict Jews as the main opponents of Jesus. Beginning with their desire to murder him early in his career, and repeatedly attacking Jesus regarding multiple aspects of his life and ministry, "the Jews" come across as a sorry and despicable group of people. The long-term impact of these narratives quickly crystallized into violent anti-Semitism among numerous generations of Christian interpreters throughout church history. Their initial interpretation of John has continued for two millennia as a sad witness to the disdain, fear, and hatred of Jews across many regions. The words of Samuel Sandmel, written in 1956, still ring true: "In its utility for later Jew-haters, the Fourth Gospel is pre-eminent among the New Testament writings."²

Jewish Questions about John

As a rabbi and professor of Jewish studies for more than four decades, I have often been asked by Jewish congregants and students to explain various New Testament (NT) passages that come across to modern Jewish readers as harsh or judgmental, many of which sting as if they had been aimed directly at

² Samuel Sandmel, *A Jewish Understanding of the New Testament*, 3rd ed. (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005), 269.

Jewish listeners. Moreover, many of the events described in the NT appear to originate from an ancient author whose understanding of or experience with Judaism is completely inexplicable to the modern Jew. The Gospel of John has specifically been the source of many of these difficult passages.

Generally, my responses to these troublesome questions about the Fourth Gospel have not always applied the latest hermeneutical tactics that argue for deeper or alternate readings of the text, which merely attempt softening John's polemical attacks against Jews. Instead, I have tried to understand John in the same way educated laypersons do when they open the book of John and take the text at face value according to its original context and authorial intent. When this is done without the benefit of scholarly patina, several salient Johannine ideas come to the fore: 1) first century Jews knew about but rejected the clear witness of their own Scriptures to the truth about Jesus of Nazareth—clearly the long-awaited messiah—and that their reasons for this denial were unbelief, hardness of heart, and/or willful spiritual blindness; 2) Jesus consciously arrogated to himself the personal name of the God of the Jewish Scriptures; 3) early first century Jews violently “expelled” Christians from their synagogues because of their fear of the truth; 4) Jesus made multiple claims about himself that “the Jews” falsely defined as blasphemous capital offenses, illegitimately using this blasphemy to have Jesus murdered. The result has been three basic acknowledgments among scholars:

First, Johannine specialists have noted and acknowledged the historical inexactness of the Fourth Gospel, especially when he depicts events that occurred quite late in the first century as if they had happened to Jesus during his lifetime. Jewish readers with a basic awareness of the first century development of Judaism are understandably bothered by this tendency.

Second, progressive Christian scholars have challenged many conservative assumptions and beliefs about John, especially in terms of literalistic hermeneutics that portray the Evangelist as an accurate observer and documenter of Jesus' own words. Progressive NT scholars have labored mightily for decades over the question of the difference between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, or the teachings *of* Jesus versus post-resurrection teachings *about* Jesus, and this is an interpretative chasm that is not likely to be spanned any time soon. Nevertheless, it is unreasonable to expect modern Jewish readers to keep abreast of the latest in Johannine scholarship, especially work that is designed to render an ancient text in the service of modern Christian faith and praxis. Because Jewish readers do not approach John with the details of technical NT scholarship in hand, it is insufficient simply to note

that such-and-such scholar now reads John differently than what the Gospel author himself stated plainly.

Third, it may appear that Jewish reactions to the Fourth Gospel are can be just as negative towards Christianity as John is to Judaism. A simple response to such a charge includes the notion that when a modern Jew reads a NT author attacking “the Jews,” especially attacks based on a flawed conception of Judaism, a negative reaction is to be expected. However, worse than the personal effrontery that an individual reader might experience is the fact that these overtly anti-Semitic depictions appear to demonstrate John’s utter ignorance of first century Judaism. Consequently, Jews may completely dismiss John as irrelevant, ignore any truth in his message, or abandon any hope for a mutually beneficial exchange between Jews and Christians.

The Myth of a Common Tradition

Almost thirty years ago, Jacob Neusner published a small book with the title, *Jews and Christians: The Myth of a Common Tradition*.³ In eight powerful essays, Neusner defended an important thesis still overlooked by many biblical scholars today: “The conception of a Judeo-Christian tradition that Judaism and Christianity share is simply a myth in the bad old sense: a lie.”⁴ This is demonstrable because “neither religion has a theory of the other framed in terms that the outsider can share.”⁵ In fact, Judaism and Christianity were “each speaking within precisely the same categories but *so radically redefine the substance of these categories* that conversation with the other became impossible.”⁶

Christians from the outset believed that by combing the Jewish Scriptures, they could attain an accurate understanding of “Judaism.” Of course, it is noteworthy that Christianity chose a phrase from a Judahite prophet (see Jeremiah 31:31–37) to describe its own idea of a correct relationship with God, and it is fascinating that the passage in which the phrase appears offers a good illustration of one critical difference between the two faith systems. Judaism and early Christianity each pursued a “new” covenant but, to use Neusner’s words, “radically redefined the substance” of

³ Jacob Neusner, *Jews and Christians: The Myth of a Common Tradition* (1991; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003).

⁴ Ibid., ix.

⁵ Ibid., ix–x.

⁶ Ibid., 5; italics added.

that covenant.⁷ The book of Jeremiah twice notes that the new covenant was to be a covenant for and with *Israel and Judah*, and it makes no mention of Gentiles. Instead, Jeremiah 31:33 speaks of engraving upon the hearts of *Israelites* and *Judahites* the principles of the old covenant. Continuing along this pathway, the post-biblical rabbis who created the Mishnah-Tosefta-Talmud did not reshape the Old Torah or their reissuance of it to include Gentiles, nor did they conceive of a new Torah producing a different covenant that was nothing less than a radical divorce from everything old. Instead, they made it clear that the “new covenant” was to be an internalization, actualization, a total assimilation of the principles of old that were deemed to be eternally true and valid for the Jewish people. By contrast, early on Christianity began to emphasize the universality of its mission, jettisoning major components that were central to the Torah in the process. As such, Jews read Jeremiah’s new covenant to be about divine instruction (*torah*), and they heard both a call for internalization and a promise of restoration to the eternal truth of the Old in the prophet’s words. Christianity placed its focus on “belief,” and its followers heard a call for the radical deconstruction of the Old as well as a blueprint for an expansion of covenantal promise into a newness that reached far beyond the boundaries of Israel and Judah.

The rabbinical perspective on biblical truth was that the Torah, newly articulated and updated in the Mishnah to take modernity into account, was above all “doable” (Deut. 30:11–14) and that the person who failed or refused to “do” Torah was *choosing* death over life (30:15). The contrast between these two choices could not be starker: “life and the good” (*’et ha-hayyim ve’et ha-tov*) versus “death and the evil” (*’et ha-mavet ve’et ha-ra’*). Both alternatives are the result of a conscious choice, yet “life and the good” was attainable through honest effort. Later the Apostle Paul took this same passage to be a clear reference to “the word of faith which we preach” (Rom. 10:8b), and the broader Christian appeal to Jeremiah fell into line with Paul’s re-interpretation of the old covenant found in Deuteronomy. The result was a “New” Testament designed to serve as a lens through which to view and understand properly the old covenant. No one appeared to notice that this perception of the “new” covenant, expressed properly through “faith” (*believability* rather than *doability*), radically reconstructed any relationship to the old covenant. These radical differences appear as soon as Christianity becomes separable from Judaism. Despite a shared vocabulary and common spiritual goals, the

⁷ Greek *diatheke* translates the familiar Hebrew *berit* here, as almost everywhere else in the Septuagint.

definitions and functions of the central themes within these two faith systems began and were developed as fundamentally different.

Before the dawn of Christianity, Judaism had already started the process that would yield its “Mishnah.”⁸ The title of the work itself (“Repetition”) implies that its function in Judaism was comparable to the role that would come to be played by the New Testament in Christianity. In both cases, that role was to reshape the ancient Scriptures for service to modernity, preserving basic values but presenting them in different cultural and temporal dress. “Judaism” thus became not the religion of the Hebrew Scriptures, or the Christian Old Testament, but the system carved out by sages who lived after their biblical literature had been completed and witnessed the near total destruction of their daily lives. With no king, no nation, and no temple, much of the Hebrew Scriptures became indecipherable or inapplicable. The work of these Jewish sages was to mine from scriptural narratives the core values they presented, strip them of time-bound and event-specific applications, and then re-issue them as timeless and abiding truths to serve the needs of their modernity.⁹ Since the development of the New Testament occurred along separate tracks within the chronological boundaries of the same era, Neusner is correct to insist that Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity offered two radically different systems of religious faith and praxis to the world *from the outset*.

Dialogue between Sisters: Questions and Answers

Ultimately, individuals within each of the two systems will need to decide whether to offer or withhold respect for the “other” as a pathway to truth with its own independent integrity, and clearly the first step in any attempt at meaningful dialogue between the two faiths must be to acknowledge their differences. Then, perhaps, members of each group can begin to understand how the “other” reads and appropriates their common sacred texts and values—the Jewish Scriptures, Old Testament.

What, then, are the issues in the Gospel of John that divide Jews and Christians? A starting point would include at least the following:

⁸ The Mishnah was not formally published until ca. 220 CE, but it includes rabbinical debates that began as much as one hundred years before the birth of Jesus.

⁹ See Charles David Isbell, *How Jews and Christians Interpret Their Sacred Texts: A Study in Transvaluation* (Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2014).

1. Who wrote the Gospel of John and why is his perspective so radically different from that of the other Synoptic Gospels?
2. Does John represent an identifiable community of early Christians with specific theological views?
3. Who were “the Jews” that are featured so prominently in John? Modern scholars have sought to answer this question by positing three or four different meanings of the phrase rather than by assuming, as a nominally intelligent, non-scholarly reader surely does, that “the Jews” in John are to be defined as a single, consistent group of people. This difference must be examined and explained.
4. What charges did “the Jews” level against Jesus? What role did these charges play in the final act of Jesus’ life that resulted in his crucifixion?
5. Did Jesus actually claim the divine name YHWH for himself?
6. Did Jews really expel early Christians violently from synagogues? If so, when and why?
7. From a Jewish perspective, was Jesus the fulfillment of the “Suffering Servant” in the book of Isaiah?
8. Is it realistic to assume with John that “the Jews” wanted to murder Jesus early in his career?
9. Where does the Gospel of John fit into the history of anti-Semitism?
10. Are there any issues presented in John of which modern Jews and Christians might agree and, therefore, unite to in productive dialogue?

Conclusion

If Neusner is correct, it may be impossible for Jewish outsiders to read the Gospel of John with appropriate empathy and respect, but it should be important for both Jews and Christians (biblical scholars and lay persons alike) to understand what many Jews (and perhaps other non-Christians as well) hear and feel when they read the Fourth Evangelist. Of course, Jews and Christians do not hear the same message when they read the same Johannine text, yet ignoring or denouncing thoughtful interpretations by each other is not helpful. Likewise, counter arguments purporting a more correct interpretation (“Christian” *or* “Jewish”) are equally unhelpful. Jews and Christians must be honest about what each side hears when reading the text of John. Since it is not satisfying just to note the differences and leave things as they are, each side needs to understand not only *what* the other side truly thinks, but *why*. And each side must decide whether it is possible to respect the other as an authentic

pathway to “godness,” with its own independent integrity for those who honestly and faithfully walk it.¹⁰ Above all, the goal must not be to produce a hermeneutical winner, and at the same time an historical loser, in examining various ways to read and study the impact John has had on modern readers.

If the Church is the Mother of the Christian and the Torah is the Mother of the Jew (“a tree of life to all who hold it fast”), it seems pointless to argue over whose “Mom” is prettier. However, it is very much on point for us to learn to appreciate and celebrate the richness of the two starkly different approaches to life and faith that both mothers have offered throughout history. Since the structure of Christianity is as difficult for modern Jews to understand as many of the basic ideas of Judaism are for Gentiles, it is precisely here that the central difficulty facing any hope of Jewish-Christian dialogue must be located, defined, and overcome. Without total and frank honesty, meaningful dialogue is little more than a fantasy, and the result is that members of the two sister faiths cannot partner with each other to seek the improvement of a fractured world. Jewish responses to troublesome passages in John almost certainly cannot be those of most Christian believers, but they can serve as an appeal to Christian brothers and sisters to understand why John impacts so many Jewish readers as it does. And perhaps they can challenge Christian interpreters of John to more carefully separate the wheat from the chaff, to distinguish the essential spiritual value of John from the hurtful and often erroneous depiction of “the Jews.”

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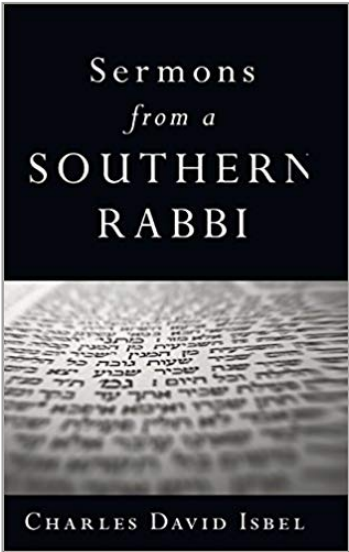
¹⁰ This is the true meaning of the word *halakhah*. It is not simply Jewish law, but a “walk,” a pathway of life.

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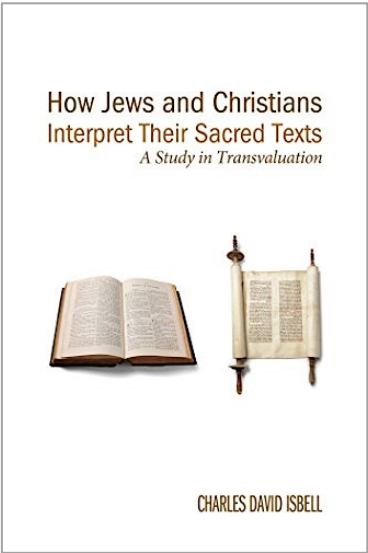
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